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from CONTROL THEORY  
IN THE CLASSROOM  
(1986) Glasser

## The Needs That Drive Us All

All living creatures are driven by the basic need to attempt to stay alive and reproduce so that the species will continue. As creatures have evolved from simple to complex, the basic need to survive and reproduce has been augmented by additional basic needs. As stated in Chapter 2, humans not only need (1) to survive and reproduce, but also (2) to belong and love, (3) *to gain power*, (4) to be free and (5) to have fun. All five needs are built into our genetic structure as instructions for how we must attempt to live our lives. All are equally important and must be reasonably satisfied if we are to fulfill our biological destiny. I italicize the need for power because, unlike the other four needs that are shared to some extent by many higher animals, the way we continually struggle for power in every aspect of our lives seems uniquely human.

We are also born with no choice but to feel pain when a need is frustrated and pleasure when it is satisfied. The quicker and more severe the frustration, the more pain we feel; the quicker and deeper the satisfaction, the more pleasure we experience. We also feel a continual urge to behave when any need is unsatisfied and we can no more deny this urge than we can deny the color of our eyes. For example, when we are thirsty, we have a great urge to seek water because to satisfy the genetic instruction to survive, we must have sufficient water in our tissues. At birth we may not know what thirst is, but we know that we are unsatisfied. We feel both the pain associated with

dehydration and the urge to behave, although at that time we have no idea what to do to satisfy our thirst.

Simple survival instructions like hunger, thirst and sexual frustration are relatively clear-cut, and we quickly learn what particular discomfort is attached to all the aspects of this need. For example, in the desert, where water is scarce, there is little ambiguity as to what thirst is and what will satisfy it. When we attempt to satisfy the nonsurvival, essentially psychological, needs, such as belonging, fun, freedom and especially power, we run into more difficulty because what will satisfy these needs is much less clearly defined. For example, it is much harder to find a friend than to come in from the cold. The need for power is particularly difficult to satisfy because in many cultures (certainly ours) the mores of the culture condemn those who openly strive for it. Even politicians try to appear humble, emphasizing how much they wish to serve and how little they want to tell us what to do.

But regardless of cultural prejudices, power itself is neither good nor bad. There is nothing bad about wanting a fancy car or a big boat. In fact, if it were not for the need for power, our whole economy would crumble because almost all that is bought and sold, except for bare necessities, is for the sake of power. Except for a few of the classified ads, almost all the advertisements we are exposed to in any media are for products that will make their purchasers more powerful. No one needs a Porsche to get to work or a designer label on blue jeans.

When someone uses his power to help downtrodden people satisfy any of their needs, especially to get some power, this use of power is humane. But history records few examples of people like Martin Luther King, Jr., who used what power he had for the benefit of the powerless. Instead, history is replete with tyrants who used their power to hurt people, and the reason that so many of us see power as bad is because so many people have been its victims. But even tyrants tend to talk about power as if it is bad: They wish that their enemies would let them be

more humble. Their purpose is always to preach the virtues of humility because the more people they can persuade to be humble, the more easily they can both preserve and add to the power that they have.

Power therefore carries a cultural taint which does not seem to extend to the other psychological needs. I know of no culture that denigrates the need to love and belong. Freedom is also cherished by almost all societies, and while fun may not get the recognition it deserves, it seems to be an integral part of both primitive and civilized cultures. That these needs are built into our genetic structure is difficult to prove. It is, however, well known that infants who are given only physical care but no love or attention will become withdrawn, fail to assimilate their food and die of a peculiar starvation called marasmus. This is strong evidence that this need is present and pressing from birth.

Early in our evolution, the psychological needs which have now become separate were probably linked to our need for survival. For example, we are descended from people who learned that they had to nurture each other to survive. Living in groups, cooperating, sharing and caring gave our ancestors so much advantage over those who were less cooperative that our human species gradually became dominant. Certainly the beginning of the separate need to care is seen in many higher animals, and in apes and gorillas it is probably almost as developed as it is in us. Without long-term parental care, no mammalian babies will survive, and anyone reading this is well aware that in humans love between parents and children never seems to run out. Almost all of us are uncomfortable when we are alone for too long, and it is my belief that children whom we call autistic, who seem to have little or no need for others, may be suffering from a defect in this genetic instruction just as surely as a child suffering from a specific genetic defect called Down's syndrome may be retarded and physically handicapped.

While it is easy to understand that people who strive for power may become dominant and have a better

chance to survive, most of us have difficulty accepting that this need is written in our genes. As I have mentioned, culturally we have been taught by those in power to be humble and that it is not moral to try to gain too much power. That their teachings have been largely accepted when what they advocate is so obviously self-serving is a tribute to how effective they have been in getting their message across. But also, because we want power so badly, we often support those who are stronger in the hope that they will share a little of what they have with us. And if they are wise, they do. Successful politicians are masters of this approach and the same expertise is not unknown in business, higher education and even religion.

If you look around in any society, you cannot fail to see the all-pervasive effect of this need. Families band together for power, but if they succeed in becoming very powerful, they tend in almost all cases to fight among themselves for the lion's share of what they have. Rather than go over what seems so obvious, just ask yourself one question: Who do you know who is so completely satisfied with his life that he can go a week without complaining that someone has gotten in the way of what he wanted to do? Most of us cannot get through a gripe-free day: To be satisfied with how others have treated us for a week would seem like an eternity.

We are intensely competitive. If we think that we have any chance at all to move beyond bare survival, we are almost all ambitious. We worry about winning, our honor, our pride, our integrity, our desire to be heard, our need to be right, who recognizes us, whether we are achieving enough, rich enough, good-looking, well-dressed, influential—the list is endless. We are easily jealous and “stupid” people call us arrogant when all we are is competent. We worry about status, position and whether we have clout. We are constantly trying to avoid those who would coerce us, manipulate us or use us. That we have often been wronged and seek revenge is much on the minds of many of us. Do people put us down or

avoid us when we offer “constructive” criticism of how they live their lives? If what I have written here—and I could go on and on—does not pertain to the way you live your life, then it may be that you are not driven by this need. But then maybe you are not of our species: Among us, even the humble compete for who can be the humblest of all.

You can decide for yourself whether power is used more for good than for evil, but simply as a genetic need it has no morality. Our needs push us for fulfillment; whether in our attempt to satisfy them we do right or wrong is up to each of us to decide. I am spending so much time explaining this need because it is by far, especially for young people, the most difficult to fulfill. As I will explain later, if students do not feel that they have any power in their academic classes, they will not work in school. The same could also be said for teachers. There is no greater work incentive than to be able to see that your effort has a power payoff.

Freedom, another basic need, is often in conflict with power, and even to some extent with belonging. The more power you have, even if you use it for my benefit, the less freedom I have. It seems that there has to be a counterforce to power; unbridled power would be destructive to the survival of the species. Therefore, almost everything said about power could also be reworded into the vocabulary of freedom. For example, we may be inherently competitive but we want the freedom of when and where to compete. We want to win but we want to be free to lose without losing too much. And as much as a child may love her parents, she also wants the freedom to branch out on her own. So you can see that freedom can be in conflict not only with power but also belonging. For example, if you want me around too much, I claim you stifle me, but if you aren't constantly giving me attention, I may claim you don't love me. But this is far from a necessary conflict and most of us are able to figure out compatible ways to satisfy these needs.

Most people, after some thought, have no difficulty accepting that love, power and freedom are as basic as the need to survive. They might, however, question my claim that fun is a basic need. They wonder, do we really need to have fun and what is it, anyway? It's hard to define but we all know that fun is associated with laughter, play and entertainment. It's the part of the job that you don't have to do, but doing it may be the best part of the job. It is never serious, but it is often important: All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy. It can be frivolous, but it doesn't have to be. It is the intangible joy that people experience when they discover how much they share when they didn't expect to get along so well or the unexpected dividend that accompanies a plan that turns out so much better than expected. It can be planned but is much more likely to be spontaneous. It can balance a lot of misery and it is like a catalyst that makes anything we do better and worth doing again and again.

Not only humans have fun, even though we seem to be the only creature who laughs. My observation is that all animals who can make choices as to what to do to fulfill their needs seem at times to have fun. The higher the animal, the more fun: Apes appear to be more fun seeking than dogs or cats. The older the creature, the less it seems interested in fun, but given an opportunity, human beings in the last third of their lives seem as much interested in pursuing fun as young people, especially if they have the time and money to do so. Lower animals, whose behavior is essentially built-in and who do not have much ability to learn, are not involved with fun. If you want a fun pet, you would not choose a turtle.

My guess is that we (and all higher animals who are capable of learning) will survive in direct proportion to how much we can learn. So, driven by the need for fun, we always have a powerful genetic incentive to keep trying to learn as much as we can. Without the relationship between fun and learning we would not learn nearly as much, especially when we are young and have so much to

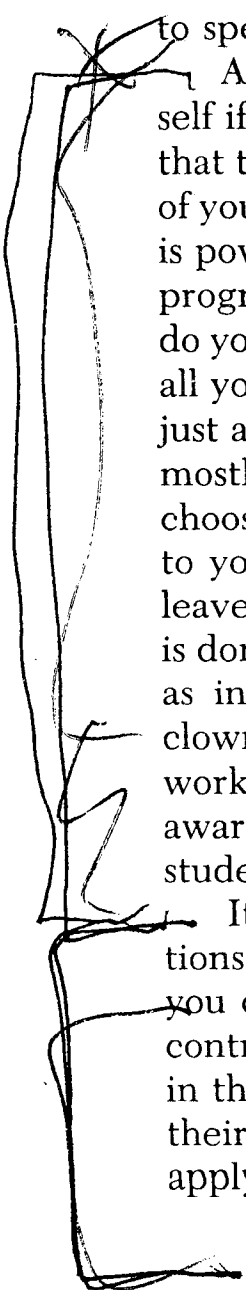
learn. I realize that we also learn for power, love and freedom but to satisfy these often requires long-term dedication. It is the immediate fun of learning that keeps us going day by day, especially when we are young and have so much to learn. Just watch a baby or a puppy at play and you will see that during all the obvious fun and clowning some important learning is also going on. In fact, even if all we set out to do is have fun, if we succeed, it is almost impossible not to have learned something new and often important.

When little babies discover something while playing, they squeal for joy because even though they don't realize it, they are having fun. In fact, when any of us are in any situation where we decide that we no longer want to learn, we stop having fun. While old dogs and cats who no longer play could be said to have learned about all they want to know, higher animals like us (and maybe apes and porpoises) never seem to stop pursuing fun, because driven by so many needs, we can never learn enough to satisfy ourselves for any appreciable length of time.

A good comedian is always a good teacher. It is the clear, sharp but unexpected insights of a comic like Bill Cosby that are so filled with learning that we cannot fail to laugh. When highly trained astronauts voyage into space they find that joking and clowning are the best way to keep sharp as they struggle with the unforeseen difficulties that require quick learning. And as you almost always remember, your best teachers were able to make learning so much fun that you may still recall what they taught even though you have little use for it now. What you remember is the fun, and in doing so, seem not to be able to forget the learning that was a part of it.

— Boring is the opposite of fun. It always occurs when we have to spend time without learning: A monotonous task is always boring. If we can find a way to learn while doing something repetitive (for example, listening to the tape of a good book while commuting), this can make a boring ride to and from work fun. In fact, boredom can be de-

feated by the satisfaction of any basic need (for example, making the task competitive as in a corn-shucking contest or social as Tom Sawyer did when he was painting the fence). A prisoner who is actively planning his escape finds his confinement much less oppressive. Anytime we can introduce power, freedom or belonging into any situation, we find it is much more interesting. But as we do, we also find ourselves having fun and cannot help learning along the way. Now we will find ourselves laughing where previously we were yawning. I am sure you have noticed the deadly boredom that pervades any time that you have to spend with someone who "knows it all."



At this point, keeping these needs in mind, ask yourself if the students in your classes sense that they belong, that they are friendly with other students and supportive of you and each other. Do your students realize that there is power in knowledge, and if they do not, have you any program to help them gain this vital belief? For example, do you believe in academic competition, and if you do, do all your students have some chance to win? Or are there just a few high-achieving consistent winners and the rest mostly losers? Do your students have any freedom to choose what to study or any say in how they might prove to you that they are making progress? Are they free to leave class to go to the library or to the gym if their work is done and they are waiting for others to finish? Is there, as in the spaceships, some laughter and good-natured clowning in which you are an active participant as they work or discuss assignments? Even if you have not been aware of these needs, have you been concerned that your students find satisfaction in your class?

It is not important now how you answer these questions. What is important is that you keep them in mind as you continue reading this book. While I still have some control theory to explain, the thrust of this book is implied in the previous paragraph: The more students can fulfill their needs in your academic classes, the more they will apply themselves to what is to be learned. How to do this



is not easy, but it is also not easy to face class after class in which many students make little effort to learn. In the next two chapters I will attempt to teach you enough applied control theory so that you should be able to see why I suggest the learning-team approach that is the thrust of this book, an approach that should lead you to answer yes to the questions in the previous paragraph.

It is important that you as a teacher understand that the questions asked two paragraphs back apply as much to you as to your students. If you do not find your work satisfying, you will never be able to do it as well as you would like. No class can ever be satisfying unless both teachers and students find it so. Therefore, this book is as much addressed to your satisfaction as to your students'. It will seem to be more about them than you, but this is because anything you can do to help them will help you as well.